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ABSTRACT

This article offers suggestions to school board members for developing effective grassroots lobbying. Tips include: (1) hook up with an organized network; (2) set an advocacy policy; (3) select an advocacy strategy for policy issues; (4) reach out for broad support; and (5) deliver the message through the media. Guidelines are offered for writing, calling, and meeting with legislators, and 10 rules of effective lobbying are highlighted in a sidebar. (LMI)

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School Board Members: Advocates for American Education

by Michelle Richards

The gavel goes down at the close of another school board meeting. Some important decisions were made, but do those views reverberate in the halls of your state capitol and the U.S. Congress? They should. Because in those halls other decisions are being made that will impact your school district and schools across the state and nation. That is why advocacy is such a critical part of the activity and responsibility of every school board and school board member.

What is advocacy?

Put simply, advocacy is becoming engaged in the political process at the local, state and national levels — making your voice heard in order to influence the public policies that impact our lives and the lives of our nation's school children. Becoming an education advocate is "going public" with your views on what is needed to have the most effective public education. It is recognizing that you have an important message to deliver and have the power to influence the outcome. It is bringing that message to all those arenas that affect education policy — the U.S. Congress, your state legislators, the media and your broader communities. It is taking the time to learn the tricks of the advocacy trade to increase your impact.

Michelle Richards is the Federal Relations Network Advocate for NSBA.

Why is it important for school board members to become advocates?

First, because there is a great need to deliver this message: Education must become a priority in local, state and national policy. In this time of shrinking budgets, our national and state policy makers must understand that education is too important an investment to be placed on the chopping block.

The need for advocacy is increased by the large number of laws mandated on local school districts by state legislatures and the federal government, as well as regulations promulgated by state and federal departments of education. These make it imperative for school boards to become involved in the broader political arena.

Second, it is important because school board members can be extremely powerful advocates. They have political clout. Legislators listen to the folks back home, particularly those who have knowledge in the area that they are advocating. Since the school board member is truly on the front lines of education, he or she can explain the impact that state and federal policy decisions will have on schools in that legislator's district. And, since school board members are themselves elected officials, or appointed by elected officials, their voices carry even more weight. Many school board members have the backing of a constituency that is even larger than that of their member of Congress.

Can school board members really have an impact outside their school district?

Yes. In fact, legislators are often more influenced by constituents than by full-time lobbyists. That is why NSBA and state school boards associations rely so heavily on local school board members to help them deliver their message to legislators. It has become almost a truism to say that political power and influence lies at the grassroots.

In recent years, the influence of grassroots movements has actually been on the rise. Washington, D.C.-based groups are increasingly looking to the grassroots political muscle — writing letters, visiting legislators, talking to the press and getting others involved and active — to push legislation through Congress. The so-called "hired gun" lobbyist can no longer work effectively without grassroots backing.

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What is the connection between local school board leadership and advocacy at the state and national levels?

The more you work with other organizations and individuals in your community on education policy issues, the more effective you will be as a board member and as an advocate at the state and local levels. Many school boards urge local parent groups, other educators, special interest groups, business and service organizations, other school boards and other community members to press for favorable legislative action on education issues.

This type of coalition building is critical to effective advocacy and establishes the board member as a leader in the campaign for better public education. Also, visible advocacy on state and national issues — such as writing letters to the editor — demonstrates to your local community the breadth of your efforts to support public education.

How can you maximize your advocacy impact?

You know that you have the power to be an influential advocate. You recognize that there is considerable need for you to add advocacy to your school board member responsibilities. You want to maximize the impact of your advocacy. There are several sure-fire activities that you can engage in. The trick is to make a habit out of your advocacy. The following are some key tips for optimizing advocacy impact:

TIP: Hook up with an organized network.

One of the best ways to increase the influence of your school board is to join a broader network of education advocates — to get organized! Imagine school board members from across the country or state joining together in an organized movement to lobby their national or state elected officials on a particular issue, delivering a similar message. Those legislators would hear that message loud and clear and realize the importance of that issue over the many other issues vying for their attention.

There are many easy ways to join organized lobbying efforts. For instance, NSBA's Federal Relations Network, made up of locally elected and appointed school board members, lobbies together for the interests of public education in general and their local constituents. State school boards associations have organized grassroots networks that lobby effectively at the state level. In addition to the power of joining forces with other advocates, those networks provide valuable information about which issues need your attention, when to get involved and how to have an impact.

TIP: Set an advocacy policy.

Typically the reaction time for getting involved in legislative advocacy at the state and national levels is fairly brief. When an issue gets hot, you and your board need to be ready to jump into action. Setting an advocacy policy in advance establishes the commitment to advocacy and can speed up response time. Your board's policy could contain the following points:

- a directive to join a broader advocacy network at the state and national levels.
- a directive to nominate a point person to be the conduit for information and action. That point person may be given the power to write and contact legislators on behalf of the entire board.
- a directive to set aside time at each board meeting for a report on state and national advocacy issues to keep up to date and inform everyone attending.
- a directive to add advocacy to the communications policy and to identify a press spokesperson for the board on state and national issues.
- a directive to use every available means of communication — board newsletters, general media, public forums — to publicize federal and state legislative and policy issues being addressed by the board.

TIP: Select an advocacy *strategy* for priority issues.

Whenever you mount a lobbying effort, planning is key. Know what you want to accomplish, develop your priorities, and stick to them. Often, a state or national network will provide suggested strategies that you can adopt. However, you and your board will still need to agree on the particular issues and tactics that you are going to make your top priorities.

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TIP: Reach out for broad support/build a local coalition.

Coalition building is a natural part of the local leadership of your school board and it can be a powerful advocacy tool. When working on a specific lobbying effort, decide if a coalition will help achieve your goals. Think about the nature of the issue — some issues have a broader appeal than others. If your issue is strictly your issue, pursue it alone. However, if it is a broad issue of interest to all of public education, pursue a coalition.

Think diversity when building your coalition. Look to other school boards, teachers, parents, administrators, other local elected officials, business and community leaders to join your effort.

It is critical to have a consistent message from your coalition. An easy way to make sure everyone is singing the same tune is to have coalition members sign on to a "coalition letter" to your legislators that specifically outlines the coalition's position. Also, if you are working on a national or statewide campaign, check in with your state association or NSBA to determine the consistency of your message with other school boards.

TIP: Deliver your message through the media.

If used well, the media can be one of the most influential advocacy tools. Legislators look to the media to take a pulse on what is important to their constituents. If you lobby the media effectively, your view and your issue are likely to get positive press that will come to the attention of legislators and help sway public opinion.

To get the most out of the media, remember these points:

- Include media relations on federal and state issues in your school boards communication policy.
- Appoint a spokesperson for the board *and* the schools.
- Incorporate the media in your overall legislative strategy.
- Meet with the editorial boards of your newspapers.
- Write letters to the editor, and opinion editorials.
- Take advantage of radio call-in shows, cable access programs and other talk show formats.
- Talk with reporters on the education beat when there is a legislative issue that would make a good local story.

You are public education's best advocate.

The suggestions in this article and in the accompanying side bars (Writing Your Legislator, Calling Your Legislator and Meeting With Your Legislator) are intended to help you in accomplishing and enjoying your role as education's key advocates. As school board members, you are committed to providing the vision that will set the course for public education in the 21st Century; to building the structure to support that vision; and to being accountable for the performance of our public schools. Translating that commitment into action *is* advocacy. ■

The 10 Rules of Effective Lobbying

RULE 1: Research your legislators' backgrounds, committee assignments and voting records on your issues.

RULE 2: Develop relationships with your legislators and their key staffs by consistently visiting, writing and calling.

RULE 3: Do not overdo your lobbying. Keep it to a letter a month and *only* when you have something new to say.

RULE 4: Invite your legislator back to your neck of the woods. Plan a tour of your district to showcase programs in action.

RULE 5: Lobby with your real life experience. It's your most persuasive tool.

RULE 6: Set priorities. When everything is important, nothing is important.

RULE 7: Shore up lobbying allies to demonstrate broad support.

RULE 8: Do not forget the media. Getting your message out to the press can influence your legislators and public opinion.

RULE 9: Always be positive and courteous. In politics, there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, but there is always politeness.

RULE 10: Everyone likes a pat on the back. Remember to thank your legislator for jobs well-done.

WRITING YOUR LEGISLATOR

As a school board member, the most effective way to write to your legislator is as a representative of your entire board. To make certain that letters can be written in the often brief timeframe of state and national politics, you will want to have a policy in place authorizing a point person on the board to write on behalf of the board or for the board president's signature. When writing to your legislator, it may help to keep the following in mind:

1. Focus on one issue or bill per letter and identify the bill by name and number.
2. Express your point of view and explain why your legislator should be supportive. Be brief and courteous.
3. Briefly explain the local impact of the legislation.
4. Ask your legislator to take a specific position on the bill. If you want your legislator to support the bill, you may want to ask him/her to co-sponsor it.
5. Request a response.
6. If it is an individual letter, use your signature and letterhead, but state that you are a board member. If it is the board's letter, have the president of the full board sign and put it on the board's letterhead.
7. Make sure your return address is on the letter. (Envelopes often get lost.)

For the fastest response to letters to your federal legislators and the President, address them to:

The President The White House Washington, DC 20500	For Representatives: The Honorable _____ U.S. House of Representatives Washington, D.C. 20515	For Senators: The Honorable_____ U.S. Senate Washington, D.C. 20510

If the time frame is too short for regular mail, consider faxing your letter. Many members of Congress have published fax numbers which can be obtained by calling your Congressperson's district office, NSBA or your state school boards association.

CALLING YOUR LEGISLATOR

Phone calls are an effective and fast way to communicate with your legislator, especially when a critical vote is coming up. A phone call can remind legislators that constituents are closely monitoring their votes. Phone calls are tallied and legislators receive counts of constituents for and against the particular issue. When phoning your legislator, keep the following in mind:

1. Ask for your legislator or for the legislative assistant who handles the issue, or briefly state your position to the receptionist.
2. Give your name, school district and address so that you can receive a written response.
3. Focus on *one* issue or bill. Whenever possible, identify the bill by number and name.
4. Ask for your legislator's position on the bill.
5. Briefly indicate what position you want your legislator to take on the issue.

To contact your U.S. Senators and Representative, call the Capitol switchboard at **(202) 224-3121** and ask to be connected to your Senator's or Representative's office. You can use local directories to find phone numbers for their local district offices.

MEETING WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

Meeting in person with your state and federal legislators is the *most* effective way to make your views known and influence legislation. Visit your members of Congress in Washington, D.C. or at their district offices back home. Legislators generally have great respect for constituents who want to meet with them personally and will make every effort to schedule a visit. However, if a visit can't be set, arrange to meet with the top aide working on your issue. When preparing for your visit, keep the following in mind:

1. **Pick only one or two key issues** to discuss and get the facts about the issue(s). Contact NSBA or your state association for background on the issue(s) and the status of the legislation.
2. **When you have a broad issue, arrange to make your visit with several allies** — other school board members, educators or community members — to demonstrate broad support for your position. Let the scheduler know who will be attending the meeting with you. Confirm your appointment before the meeting.
4. **Hold a pre-meeting** with everyone who will be lobbying to make sure all are in agreement on your position. Decide in advance who will discuss which points so that your visit runs smoothly.
5. Always **bring support materials** with you. These fact sheets, charts or backgrounders will save you precious time in making your presentation and can be left with the legislator as a reminder of the issues and your visit.
6. Jump right in, stick to the point and **don't get sidetracked.**
7. Whenever possible, **speak from personal experience.** Provide brief, specific evidence of how this issue affects your local school district.
8. **Ask directly for your legislator's support.** If your legislator is *supportive*, ask him/her to lobby other legislators. If your legislator *disagrees* with you, hear him/her out politely and rebut his/her argument if you have the facts to do so. Be courteous; you'll have other issues to take up in the future.
9. **Follow-up with a thank you note** that reinforces your position. And keep in touch by phone and mail if there are major changes that need to be addressed.